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NOTES

1. George W. Cable, *The Grandissimes*, American Century Series Edition (New York, 1957).
2. Lucy Leffingwall Cable Bikié, *George W. Cable, His Life and Letters*, (New York, 1928).
3. George W. Cable, "Les Belles Demoiselles Plantation", *Old Creole Days*, (New York, 1924). The pagination of the two passages quoted refers to this edition.

The price of charm: the heroines of

The Grandissimes

by

CHARLES SWANN

"Clotilde, my beautiful daughter," said Aurore...
 "I tell you now, because... it is my duty as a
 mother to tell you - the meanest wickedness a
 woman can do in all this bad, bad world is to
 look ugly in bed!"¹

George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* has been praised for many qualities - but not recently for its heroines. They have not over the last two decades had a good press nor have those who admired them been treated tolerantly. Newton Arvin is typical of the modern critical consensus - and my epigraph may be thought to prove his case:

Howells drooled mawkishly over the two Nancanou ladies ...

- Aurore, he said, "is one of the most delicious creations I ever knew" - but to our taste Cable's treatment of them is unendurably coy, arch, and as Mencken once said of these writers, "kittenish". (vi-vii)

I don't intend to defend Howells (who seems to suffer from a bad case of heroine addiction) but to suggest that Cable's presentation of his female characters is more complex and ironically intelligent than critics have allowed, that Aurore and Clotilde are not simply there as a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. One doesn't have to doubt that Cable intended his readers to find Aurore and Clotilde charming (and, at least as important a point, meant us to see why Honoré, Dr. Keene and Frowenfeld are smitten with them) to see that Cable also intended to show that a very heavy price is paid for that charm - and that Creole society has a vested interest in keeping (white) women in the role of charmer. *Il faut souffrir pour être belle* - is something that Aurore and Clotilde might have said - especially as they must also say *il faut être belle*:

There was a degree of impracticability in these ladies, which, if it was unfortunate, was, nevertheless, a part of their Creole beauty. (119)

Female impracticability and sentimentality are profoundly useful to the white males. When the black Clemence is captured on suspicion of voodoo

the whole tribe of Grandissime believed... in the doctrine of total depravity - of the negro.

And right in the face of this belief, the ladies put forth the generously intended prayer for mercy. They were answered that they little knew what frightful perils they were thus inviting.

The male Grandissimes were not surprised at this exhibition of weak clemency in their lovely women; they were proud of it; it showed the magnanimity that was natural to the universal Grandissime heart, when not restrained and repressed by the stern necessities of the hour. (316)

They are right not to be surprised. A sentimental sympathy is just what the Grandissime women are good for and good at - as the reaction to Raoul's retelling of the Bras-Coupé story which lies at the heart of the novel shows:

The fair Grandissimes all agreed, at the close, that it was pitiful. Specially, that it was a great pity to have hamstrung Bras-Coupé, a man who even in his cursing had made an exception in favor of the ladies. True, they could suggest no alternative; it was undeniable that he had deserved his fate; still, it seemed a pity. They dispersed, retired and went to sleep confirmed in their sentiment. (194)

This places the female response to a tragic story as smug sentimentality. These are not incidental asides. Cable has prepared for them in a passage which surely means we must look critically at the charm Aurore and Clotilde as well as their spiritual sisters exercise:

Arms, generally, rather than heads, ruled... in those days, and sentiments (which are the real laws) took shape in accordance with the poetry, rather than the reason, of things, and the community recognised the supreme domination of the "gentleman" in questions of right and of "the ladies" in matters of sentiment. Under such conditions strength establishes over weakness a showy protection which is the subtlest of tyrannies, yet which, in the very moment of extending its arm over woman, confers upon her a power which a truer freedom would only diminish: constitutes her in a large degree an autocrat of public sentiment and thus accepts her narrowest prejudices and most belated errors as a very need-be's of social life. (160)

It is a perceptive passage which deserves close attention in its demystification of "the subtlest of tyrannies." There is a heavy price to be paid for being not merely female - but a lady without cash or a man behind her. Clotilde and Aurore have only one serious conversation - and it turns on this issue. Clotilde tells her mother that it is not so hard to live - but it is hard to live as a lady:

"we are compelled not to make a living, Look at me: I can cook, but I must not cook; I am skilful with the needle, but I must not take in sewing; I could keep accounts; I could nurse the sick; but I must not."

And she goes on to run through a number of other skills which she must not get paid for - unless she is willing to lose caste. Aurore answers her in a speech which combines apparent acquiescence in the state of things with a shrewd insight into the reason for the denial of economic roles for ladies (apart, of course, from that of heiress):

"if society has decreed that ladies must be ladies, then that is our first duty; our second is to live. Do you not see why it is that this practical world does not permit ladies to make

a living? Because if they could, none of them would ever consent to be married. Ha! women talk about marrying for love; but society is too sharp to trust them yet! It makes it necessary to marry. I will tell you the honest truth; some days when I get very, very hungry, and we have nothing but rice - all because we are ladies without male protectors - I think that society could drive even me to marriage!" (255)

It is perhaps too convenient that white Honoré should promptly arrive to make restitution of the estate lost by Aurore's gambling, duelling, deceased husband - but one cannot complain that the issues have not been raised, the charm contextualized. Cable has subverted and placed in question the very conventions of the femininity he is using. Before they are showered in gold and can flourish their femininity (as Aurore does when she makes her slightly risqué comment about beauty in bed), Aurore risks an overt comparison between their condition and that of the black tragic hero Bras-Coupé: "There are many people who ought to have their rights. There was Bras-Coupé; indeed, he got them - found them in the swamp. Maybe Clotilde and I shall find ours in the street." (260) It is not, of course, that there is an identity between the situation of the white lady and that of the slaves and free men and women of colour. Cable quietly makes the point (in the chapter from which I have just quoted) that, however poor Aurore and Clotilde may be, they can still send their one slave to sell one of their dresses. Yet there is an analog. even though the tyranny of the gentleman over the lady may be trivial compared to his tyranny over the black man and even more the black woman - a situation seen in perhaps its starkest institutionalized form in the quadroom balls where white ladies and black men are alike excluded to allow the predatory white males a clear formalized field:

So far as Palmyre knew, the entire masculine wing of the mighty and exalted race, three-fourths of whose blood bequeathed her none of its prerogatives, regarded her as legitimate prey. (135-6)

Palmyre is not merely the victim but the product of that predatory race. The white Honoré has his dark double in the form of his half-brother, Honoré, free man of colour - and Aurore has hers in her half-sister, Palmyre, even if she is not conscious of the relationship.² Here is a case where (to use Kipling's famous phrase) the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are, too literally, sisters under the skin.

However minor and limited the area may be, "the ladies" are allowed supremacy in "matters of sentiment" - as long as they don't try to convert sentimental feeling into effective action. However degrading their dependence, it is preferable to the world of those defined by the dominant culture as black who have no psychological or any other space for intellectual or emotional freedom - where the "self-punitive" effect of the white tyranny

is a "pusillanimous fear of its victims". This comes from a chapter musing over the likely fate of that representative of the black proletariat, Clemence, after she has been caught in a man-trap for practising voodoo - and Cable adds "we shall presently see the Grandissime ladies, deeming themselves compassionate, urging their kinsmen to 'give the wretch a sound whipping and let her go.'" (315)

The chapter in which Aurore briefly confesses her subversive doubts about her civilization to her daughter is, significantly, preceded by a chapter in which Clemence demystifies her situation - rather as Aurore and Clotilde quickly expose what too often lies behind the (courtly) language of love - a language Cable ironically deploys:

What a mark for Love's arrow she was, as, at the window, she stretched her two arms upward! And, "right so", who should chance to come cantering by, the big drops of rain pattering after him, but the knightliest man in that old town, and the fittest to perfect the fine old-fashioned poetry of the scene! (131)

Unfortunately, unlike her white sisters, Clemence makes the mistake of speaking to an audience - a white, male audience - and relies unwisely on irony and laughter as protective veils. The white heroines, whether or not they suffer for a while, at least get conventional happy endings. Palmyre and Clemence, more heroic, more intelligent and more interesting than their white counterparts though they may be, are doomed to (affluent) exile or brutal death. Indeed, intelligence, or, at least, the display of it, may be fatal. Clemence's ironic wit is partly what brings her to her dreadful end. It doesn't pay to show that you have seen through the lies the white masculine culture is built on. Cable twice refers to that old, old story about the felicity of the blacks. The first time is when he is considering Palmyre's condition - the potential victim of practically every white man she meets:

This woman had stood all her life with dagger drawn, on the defensive against what certainly was to her an unmerciful world... And yet by inexorable decree, she belonged to what we used to call "the happiest people under the sun". We ought to stop saying that. (135)

The second reference comes in Chapter 42, "An Inheritance of Wrong", when Clemence shows herself a thinker and is patronizingly acknowledged as such by Dr. Keene. It is a judgement confirmed by Cable, who refers to her "often audacious, epigrammatic philosophy" (249) - and by so doing reminds the reader that Palmyre is known as the *Philosophie* (even if the culture puts a rather different meaning on the word).

Clemence dismantles the presuppositions behind the "happiest

people" thesis with economical brilliance - much as Aurore has exposed the connection between economic necessity, class status and romantic love. Whe points to the "big lie" of the culture - the bigger and better in that some people believe it and have, for their own comfort, to believe it:

"white folks... wants us to b'lieb we happy - dey wants to b'lieb we is. W'y... dey 'bleeged to b'lieb it - fo' dey own cymfuit. 'Tis de sem wid de preach's; dey buil' ow own sepa'te meet'n-houses; dey b'liebs we lak it de bess, and dey know dey lak it de bess." (250-1)

At the same time that she points to the false consciousness of the culture she indicates an alliance between the ideology of American racialism and European reaction. She asks Dr. Keene if it is true that the niggers are free in Europe and, if so, why do (Southern white) folks brag about the European state of society? It is a riddle that her white male auditors either can't or won't reply to. The answer is, she rashly points out, that Europe has its own caste system - only that is built on a "fixed wuckin' class". (250) And one remembers that Frowenfeld, the white middle-class liberal hero, analyzing the social system of New Orleans, argues that the quadroons will never be free until white consciousness is (somehow) transformed:

"Until they achieve emancipation in the minds and good will of the people - 'the people' did I say? I mean the ruling-class." (144)

It is a phrase which seems to baffle Aurore and Clotilde. They identify the rulers not as a class but as a sex - and Aurore's response is to give an incomplete version of the story of Palmyre - incomplete because either she does not know or cannot admit that they have the same great white father.

Clemence pays a heavy price for her perceptiveness. Her 'free-thinking' is a consequence of her exclusion and repression. Her "inheritance of wrong" is, effectively, a history which excludes the Clemences of the world from public, official history:

To Clemence the order of society was nothing. No upheaval could reach to the depth to which she was sunk...

And so on that day, when Honoré Grandissime had advised the Governor-General of Louisiana to be very careful to avoid demonstration of any sort if he wished to avert a street-war in his little capital, Clemence went up one street and down another.... laughing her professional laugh.... Let events take any possible turn, how could it make any difference to Clemence. What could she hope to gain? What could she fear to lose? (251, 2)

She had nothing to fear from the Louisiana Purchase or from rebellion against that event: it is her challenge to white male

hegemony that really endangers her. Even in her terror when she is near death, she is shrewd enough to suspect what the whites really fear:

"You musn' b'lieve all dis-yeh nonsense 'bout insurrectionin' ... W'at we want to be insurrection' faw? We de happies' people in de God's worl'!" (322)

And silly enough to claim she knew the sexual secrets of at least one of them. Now we know why the whites really need to believe in the happiness of their 'inferiors'.

Even if attention is confined to the white heroines, it can be seen that Cable places and subverts a sentimental narrative by showing what lies behind and generates the feminine surface charm. But Cable gives his fiction four heroines (two of them tragic victims) - and it is in the interactions between black and white worlds, between private loves and public politics, that he most subtly piles irony on irony. Palmyre, for example, hopelessly in love with white Honoré, "brooded" over his "remoteness" when he was completing his education in France. It is then that she is most a "mutineer who had nothing to lose", who had "heard of San Domingo... The lesson she would teach the giant [Bras-Coupe] was insurrection". (184) With Honoré's return from Europe her radicalism diminishes and her romantic love keeps her comparatively subordinated. Romantic love has its uses for the white male world - even though the object of that love may not be aware of the passion he is the object of. It is only when Palmyre learns that Honoré 'loves another' (Aurore) that she says "if I cannot love I can have my revenge". (292)

It is necessary to finish with Aurore - since she has been the focus for past infatuation by such as Howells and Barrie and present critical obloquy and since she has the last lines of the novel. That ends with her "no" that means "yes" to white Honoré's proposal. It is, of course, a device beloved of writers of romances - and the last chapter is self-consciously charming. Yet can a reader with a memory read the last lines of the novel without a placing irony when the fate of Aurore's 'sisters', Clemence and Palmyre, is remembered and when her daughter's and her own de-mystifying comments are recalled? A 'happy' ending it undoubtedly is but we surely should remember that happiness is in every way (except financially) expensive:

He rose erect and held the hand firmly which she strove to draw away:

"Say the word sweet lady: say the word!"

She turned upon him suddenly, rose to her feet, was speechless an instant while her eyes flashed into his, and crying out:

"No!" burst into tears, laughed through them, and let him clasp her to his bosom.

NOTES

1. George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life*, with an introduction by Newton Arvin, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), first published 1880, p. 288. All subsequent references will be placed parenthetically in the text. I have already acknowledged my debt to Schölin Tipping in "*The Grandissimes: A Story-Shaped World*" (Literature and History, Vol.13, No.2) and am delighted to be able to do so again.

2. The reader has to be alert to work out the relationship: the clues are there but Cable expects his readers to assemble the evidence. The blood relationship is discovered by putting together bits and pieces of information. Aurore's childhood was spent on a 'lonely plantation' where Palmyre was from early childhood her "constant and only playmate". (59) Palmyre was such "a type" as "could only have sprung from high Latin ancestry on the one side and... Jalloff African on the other". (60) Cable both in *The Grandissimes* and in *The Creoles of Louisiana* uses 'Latin' to refer to Spanish and French. So much might not be enough - until it is put beside a letter from De Grapion, Aurore's father, in the negotiations for the marriage of Palmyre and Bras-Coupé:

a very formal [letter] to Agricola begged to notify him that if Palmyre's union with Bras-Coupé should be completed, ... the writer would have the life of the man who knowingly had thus endeavoured to dishonor one who shared the blood of the De Grapions. (176. Cable's emphasis)

This should clinch it - but, in case there are any doubts, Cable returns to the point a few pages later:

Colonel De Grapion could hardly hope to settle Palmyre's fate more satisfactorily [than by a marriage between her and Honoré f.m.c.], yet he could not forego an opportunity to indulge his pride by following up the threat he had hung over Agricola to kill whosoever should give Palmyre to a black man. (185)

This gives Cable the advantage of symmetry. White Honoré has his 'dark' double in his half-brother: white Aurore has her shadow in the form of Palmyre - and the poignancy of the hopeless loves of Palmyre for white Honoré and of Honoré f.m.c. for Palmyre is reinforced.

Theatre, theatricality and

Akhatova's

Poema bez geroya

by

WENDY ROSSLYN